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Citation for published version:

Beames, S 2005, 'Expeditions and the social construction of the self', *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 14-22.

<<http://sandbox.rleighinternational.org/files/Expeds%20social%20self%20AJOE.pdf>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Australian Journal of Outdoor Education

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Beames, S. (2005). Expeditions and the social construction of the self. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 9(1), 14-22.

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Expeditions and the social construction of the self

Simon Beames

University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Abstract

This paper explores how 14 British youth were influenced by a 10-week expedition to Ghana with Raleigh International. It employs a theoretical framework based on the symbolic interactionist writing of Blumer (1969), Mead (1934), and Cooley (1962, 1964). The framework helps to understand how the meanings that participants held for different physical objects, people, and abstract concepts were constantly being modified through a process of interaction and interpretation. The findings of this case study show that participants developed a certain mental resilience, became more willing to undertake challenges, and gained a greater understanding of themselves. Interpersonally, young people developed an increased facility for working and living with people they did not know before. Finally, participants gained a greater appreciation of the modern conveniences they were accustomed to and learned about the economic and democratic differences between the UK and Ghana. Symbolic interactionism was a viable framework for this study, and would appear to be similarly useful for examining how participants in other kinds of outdoor education programmes may construct meaning and identity.

Early on in my PhD studies I learned how research can be more than considering data in relation to what has been done before. For example, findings can be further examined through various sociological, anthropological, psychological, or philosophical lenses. After months of considering which perspective was most helpful in understanding the expedition experience, I decided on symbolic interactionist sociology: an agent-centred social theory that focuses on how people construct meaning from their interactions with the world around them. As an experiential educator, symbolic interactionism has particular relevance to my practice because it offers an explanation of the processes by which experience modifies attitudes and behaviour. This paper offers a symbolic interactionist analysis of the findings of how 14 British youth were influenced by their 10-week expedition to Ghana, West Africa.

Theoretical framework

Symbolic interactionism as an approach to studying social life is summed up as “a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct ... It lodges its problems in this natural world, conducts its studies in it, and derives its interpretations from such naturalistic studies” (Blumer, 1969, p. 47). Blumer outlined three premises of symbolic interactionism. First, individuals act towards objects based on the meanings they have for them. Second, meanings arise out of interaction with those objects. And third, meanings are constantly being interpreted and modified by people’s interaction with objects. These premises explain how the meanings that people attach to social, physical, and abstract objects are not fixed, but are constantly being adjusted from their various interactions. Physical objects are inanimate, such as chairs, cars, and trees. Social objects are people, and abstract objects refer to

intangible concepts such as justice and courage. As individuals interact with objects they have an internal conversation, interpreting and transforming meaning “in light of the situation” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). These interpretations inform what humans think, feel and do.

Symbolic interactionism is particularly useful to understand how people experience their Raleigh expedition because it explains what Mead (1934) refers to as the genesis of the self. Coser (1971) describes this as a process by which “a person’s self grows out of a person’s commune with others” (p. 305). Part of human development involves becoming able to take on the role of the “other” and visualise one’s self from another person’s point of view (Mead, 1934). This suggests that people’s thoughts and behaviours are influenced by those around them, in a constant, dynamic relationship that shapes who they are. Mead (1934) argued that the final stage of human maturation involved taking the role of the generalised other – the “laws and the mores, the organized codes and expectations of the community” (p. 197) – and incorporating the attitudes of the people they interact with into their own identity.

Cooley’s (1964) contribution to understanding the self centred on what he termed the looking glass self. Like Mead, Cooley believed the self was formed by an individual’s reflexive relationships with his/her social world. This belief formed the basis for the looking glass self, a three step process comprising “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his [*sic*] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling” (Cooley, 1964, p. 184). The looking glass self contributes to the analysis by highlighting the emphasis placed upon individuals interpreting others’ interpretations. During interactions, individuals use

their interpretative abilities to consider the outcomes of different courses of action before they act, as if through the eyes of others.

Another concept that informs the interactionist perspective is Cooley's (1962) primary group. This concept has relevance to the teams of individuals so common on expeditions, as it is plausible that these teams take the place of family and close friends. Cooley (1962) described primary groups as being characterised by "intimate face to face association and cooperation ... they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individuals" (p. 23). An important difference between a primary group and other people in society is that people do not expect a personal benefit or gain from their relationships with other members of the primary group. It appears that Walsh and Golins (1976) were influenced by Cooley's writings, as they referred to primary groups in their discussion of the social environment in the Outward Bound process, but stopped short of discussing the term's theoretical origins. I am not aware of symbolic interactionism being applied as a conceptual framework for any empirical research in outdoor education.

Although symbolic interactionism came to fruition decades ago, the theory continues to develop. In particular, more attention has been given to Cooley's (1964) notion that the self and society are inseparable and influence each other. Stryker (2000) contends that the most basic proposition of symbolic interactionism is that "society shapes self shapes social behaviour" (p. 26). This structural view of symbolic interactionism places considerable emphasis on the ways in which social structure constrains, but does not determine, human agency (Stryker, 2000). Similarly, Beal (2002) states that "humans have some degree of freedom, yet we are always constrained by our social context" (p. 357). This viewpoint explains how venturers on a Raleigh expedition have the power to construct meaning and make choices, but the cultural and institutional forces surrounding them influence this power.

Past overseas expedition research

The literature derived from empirical research conducted on overseas youth expeditions may be limited, but it is growing. Most of this work has concentrated on understanding how young people are influenced by their experiences (Allison, 2000, 2002; Grey, 1984; Kennedy, 1992). Other investigations have examined participants' reasons for going on expedition (Beames, 2003) and the degree to which these experiences can be considered rites of passage (Beames, 2004). My rites of passage paper (Beames, 2004) was based on the same data as used for the current paper, but its framework was anthropological rather than sociological.

A considerable portion of the intrapersonal gains from expedition-based programmes surrounds individuals getting to know themselves better, specifically their strengths and weaknesses (Grey, 1984). Allison (2002) proposes that young people explore their feelings and past while on expedition, which helps them gain a fuller understanding of their real self. Related to participants exploring attitudes and feelings on expedition is the hope that the experience will lead to the increased development of participants' principles or values (Allison, 2002). Grey's work indicates that a broader outlook on life may result from going on an overseas expedition. This broader outlook on life, although vague, may include such outcomes as being able to more critically consider issues of social justice (Jakubowski, 2003) or increased clarity on one's place in the world.

In addition to several theoretical inquiries that have outlined how expeditions strengthen the relationships people have with others (Drasdo, 1998; Gair, 1997; Hopkins & Putnam, 1993), links between participating in an expedition and an increased ability to relate to and work with others have also been reported in empirical studies (Allison, 2002; Grey, 1984; Kennedy, 1992). Grey (1984) states that while on expedition many young explorers "had learnt the necessity of working with others and realised their ability to do so" (p. 18). This theme is strongly reflected in Kennedy's (1992) research, where increased respect, tolerance, and cooperation for other people are highlighted. Similarly, Allison's work (2002) indicates that expedition participants became more comfortable in their relationships with other people, both during the expedition and long after.

In the only reference to influences on attitudes towards the natural environment, Allison (2002) found clear links between having been on expedition and gaining a deeper appreciation of the wilderness and nature. Very little research relates directly to individuals' relationships with the natural environment, as much of the research has been conducted on intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes (Barret & Greenaway, 1995).

In overseas youth expedition literature there is little mention of how individuals who have returned home then relate to bigger networks of people in their local communities and in greater society. The one investigation on overseas youth expeditions that did examine this issue found no evidence indicating that participants had changed their attitudes or behaviours towards the community (Kennedy, 1992).

About the expedition

The study focuses on Raleigh International, a youth development charity based in London that exists "to inspire people from all backgrounds and nationalities to discover their full potential by

working together on challenging community and environmental projects around the world" (Raleigh, 2003, para. 1). Raleigh operates two expeditions a year to Chile, Ghana, Namibia, Costa Rica/Nicaragua, and Malaysia. Once the young people (known as venturers) meet in the host country, they are split into nine groups of 10 to 12 people. Each group has two volunteer staff members. After a week of induction training on camping and local customs, venturers take part in three projects: one community service, one environmental conservation, and one adventure project, each lasting three weeks.

A Raleigh expedition has four main categories of venturers. Roughly 40 percent of venturers are called self-funders, as they raise £3500 (\$8500 AUD) for the charity in order to come on the expedition. This money goes towards administrations costs at the London head office and the host country office, return airfare, and in-country project materials, equipment, ground transportation, and food. Twenty percent of venturers are from Raleigh's Youth Development Programme (YDP) and have all experienced some form of social exclusion, such as homelessness, long-term unemployment, substance abuse, and dropping out of school early. Although the YDP programme is subsidised through charitable donations and grants from bodies such as the European Social Fund and the National Charities Board, venturers must raise £800 (\$1950 AUD) to cover spending money, personal expedition equipment, and inoculations. Both self-funded and YDP venturers come from the UK. A further 20 percent of the venturers come from the host country itself. The rest of the venturers are a mixture of international venturers from countries all over the world. This inquiry focuses exclusively on venturers from the UK.

Methodology

This investigation is a case study that examines the expedition experience using data collected through a variety of methods and sources. This approach asks the researcher to become a bricoleur or "handyman" who uses various materials, strategies, and methods to piece together a representation of a complex situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Its strength lies in its "flexible set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms first to strategies of inquiry and second to methods for collecting empirical material" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 22).

Purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) was employed to handpick 15 informants, who represented a wide cross-section of participants from the UK. My aim was to choose 16 people from the ages of 17 to 25 years old, half of whom were YDP venturers and half who were self-funders, with an even gender split. In total, 14 informants, eight female and six male, participated in the study. There were

three male self-funders with an age range of 17 to 25 years, four female self-funders with an age range of 18 to 23 years, three male YDPs with an age range of 20 to 23 years, and four female YDPs with an age range of 18 to 26 years.

Primary data collection was in the form of five sets of formal, open-ended, recorded interviews. The decision to rely heavily on interviews was supported by Barret and Greenaway's (1995) report that few research studies centre on hearing the personal stories from the participants living, or having lived, the experience in question. The first interview took place two months before leaving the UK. The second, third and fourth interviews took place once during each three-week phase of the expedition. During each of the three phases I travelled around the country interviewing and spending time with participants at their project sites. The final interviews took place at various locations of the participants' choosing in the UK, six months after the expedition. Each interview was conducted one-to-one and lasted between 30 to 50 minutes. Our loosely structured conversations concentrated on how participants thought this experience was influencing them and what it was about the expedition that had elicited these influences. Although we discussed themes that had emerged from previous interviews, participants were always encouraged to speak about issues that were important to them as well (Stake, 1995). Secondary data were collected in the form of observations and informal conversations with expedition staff and venturers who were not being formally interviewed. My aim was to immerse myself in the experience in order to gain a deeper understanding of the case (Stake, 1995).

Interpreting the data began by reading the interviews at least five times. In a process informed by phenomenology, I highlighted meaningful phrases that were then clustered together in themes (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). In case studies this same process is referred to as categorical aggregation: "the aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class" (Stake, 1995, p. 74). I drew from the hermeneutic approach used by Patterson, Watson, Williams and Roggenbuck (1998) and developed themes until I was satisfied that they served the aims of the inquiry. The findings, then, are a series of themes that are classified into different categories. While each of these themes may not be applicable to each participant, together they provide a deeper understanding of the case (Stake, 1995).

In order to increase the credibility of the investigation, the data were verified using member checks, investigator triangulation, and peer review (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). Member checks involved discussing my interpretation of the interviews with each participant (Merriam, 1988; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Stake, 1995; Van Manen, 1990).

During these discussions participants had opportunities to comment on, and amend, my interpretation of our conversation. Investigator triangulation involved a colleague interpreting a nameless, transcribed interview, and then us comparing notes on the main issues found (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). The third method of verification was peer review, which entailed having an overall discussion about the findings with a colleague (Merriam, 1988). Meeting with two different members of Raleigh's senior staff six times over a one-year period helped me to consolidate my understanding of the findings.

Findings

The findings are divided into the three categories of how young people were influenced by their experiences. These categories relate to the young people's relationships with themselves, others, and greater society.

The self

The first outcome of increased self-confidence manifested itself in two ways: a newly found mental resilience and a willingness to undertake challenges. First, the data suggest that after a Raleigh expedition, participants may possess greater resolve and be better able to cope with demanding challenges. Towards the end of the expedition, Sylvio stated, "I think once I leave I'll be a lot stronger and less intimidated by daunting projects." Gordo told me "there's not much where I think, 'I can't do that.' You still have insecurities and stuff and you still get nervous, but deep inside you're just a wee bit more sure of yourself." Nonnie explained how she had a certain inner strength that she did not have before, where "you're more relaxed or more confident in yourself ... you know you can adapt and get on with it." For Friio the expedition provided opportunities to be more independent:

Now I've been able to stand on my own two feet ... and that makes you feel good and you start to believe in yourself and become more confident. My friends knew it was the same Friio, the same me, but they saw a load of difference in my nature and my maturity. (Friio)

It is plausible that the strengthened self reported by the above four venturers is a product of newly constructed meanings that participants had developed through their successful interactions with adversity. Blumer's (1969) framework suggests that these positive interactions in the face of challenging situations might have led participants to modify their interpretation of what a challenging situation is. In this instance, a challenging situation becomes something venturers are capable of dealing with, rather than something that may be harmful.

The data also show how participants' increased self-confidence made them more willing to try new activities that might have seemed too daunting before the expedition. Six months after the expedition Roni stated that:

I can do whatever I want. I'm more confident. I think I'll want to travel more now. And I might be up for maybe doing more new hobbies ... 'cause I'll be into taking a risk and jumping into doing things – trying new things, meeting new people. The great thing about Raleigh is that you take risks and you'll be up for doing a lot more things. Now I just sort of say 'yes' to things! (Roni)

Simone, too, felt that she would seek out more new experiences, which was reflected in her statement that "I'll be a bit more active I think ... I'm going to do more stuff." Stuart explained that "I feel that I can go out and do a lot of things that I just would not have had the courage to do before." He felt that his confidence helped his career: "I probably wouldn't have applied for certain jobs before I went, and now I'm applying for jobs I wouldn't have normally gone for." For Lily, increased confidence had affected many aspects of her life, particularly with respect to travel and leaving the familiarity of her neighbourhood. Lily told me how

... leaving the country to go to Africa was a big thing for me. I've been to so many countries since I've been home – just jumping on a plane. I mean, I jump in a taxi and I'm off ... if I'd never been on an expedition there's not a chance in hell I would have got in a taxi to an airport. (Lily)

These findings build upon the research done by Kennedy (1992), which showed that every single respondent felt that their expedition experience had left them more eager to try new things. Kennedy (1992) argued that their expedition had enabled the participants to gain a "new perception of what is possible" (p. 59).

The second theme in the self category involves participants gaining a greater understanding of their self and how they 'tick.' Natasha told me "I've realised I need my personal space more than I thought I did." Roni came to realise that although she thought she "was a chilled out person" she actually gets "irritated quite quickly." Rather than the expedition experience making Friio want to travel the world, he learned that he was not the explorer type and was happiest when he was around his home community. Friio explained to me how he had learned that he was "a homeboy, not a travelling worldwide person." Gordo, too, learned

something about himself that may have a long-lasting effect on his life. As an 18 year-old, he found greater satisfaction in the community-based project than the one focused more strictly on adventure. Gordo stated that "One of the things I've learned is that I really like helping people. I like helping people in the group. I like helping the communities and doing all the projects here." Natasha, Roni, Friio, and Gordo all reported learning things about themselves that they did not know before the expedition. Similarly, Sylvio's learnings about himself indicate that this experience has made his life simpler. In his own words Sylvio said "I know exactly where I am, where I'm going, what my strengths are, what I can't do, what I'd like to be able to do."

Being aware of one's traits, needs and characteristics is supported by Allison's (2002) theme of self-knowledge. In this sense, the self may be viewed as another person that one gets to know. It is possible that participants' interaction with the predictable and familiar circumstances of day-to-day living in the UK elicited meanings and interpretations that were relatively limited. The novel experiences and wider scope of interactions on an overseas expedition may provide increased opportunities to learn about one's self. This learning may result from the venturers being able to clearly see their own unchecked responses to the novel physical, social, and abstract objects they are interacting with.

Although the self is developed and modified through an interactive and interpretive process (Blumer, 1969), this process may also involve re-claiming an identity that has more congruence with one's feelings. In my discussions with Mildred, I felt her sense of relief and joy as she discovered a self she felt more comfortable with. Mildred recounted how on expedition:

I was completely myself and no one cared.
And that gave me a lot more confidence
when I came back to just be me. More
than learning new things it was just about
learning how to be me ... (Mildred)

The expedition experience may enable people to break away from an identity that they are not comfortable with, but which has become the norm in certain social patterns. Being in an entirely different set of social circumstances on expedition offers participants the opportunity to redefine their identity in the absence of the familiar and constraining social pressures of their home life. Although all social contexts have the capacity to constrain human action, the apparently high potential for individuals to explore their identity within the novel physical and social environment of an overseas expedition is difficult to ignore. Symbolic interactionist theory would suggest

that an individual's self, like all objects, has a meaning that is constantly being re-interpreted (Blumer, 1969). Seen this way, what participants interpret as the real them is a dynamic self, constantly evolving through their interaction with (and reflection upon) past behaviour, current interpretations, and imaginations of future selves.

The symbolic interactionist perspective posits that one cannot consider the self in a vacuum, without the social element (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1962; Mead, 1934). Therefore, if venturers are to come to know their selves on a Raleigh expedition, they cannot do this without the different attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of their fellow group members. As participants are separated from their primary group of friends and family in the UK on Raleigh expeditions, it would appear that the project group rapidly becomes each venturer's primary group. It is within the primary group that the self is shaped and "human nature comes into existence" (Cooley, 1962, p. 30). Take Rufus' remark that "everyone's got something to offer, everyone's got something unique and individual about them." From this perspective, a diverse primary group offers a greater range of interactions and exposure to a broader generalised other. Natasha found that a key part of her experience with Raleigh was the discussions she had with fellow venturers. These interactions played a significant part in shaping who she was:

The people I was with definitely changed
my way of thinking. Raleigh's a good
place to form your own opinions out of
other people's opinions. Although there's
not one other person I want to be like, I
found bits of other people that I want to
replicate in my life. So I've taken the best
bits of everyone and made an all-powerful
Natasha! A mighty Natasha!

Natasha's comment about taking "bits and pieces" of other people can be explained through Mead's (1934) concept of the self as a social product. Although social environments have the power to influence an individual's thinking in negative and conformist ways, it would appear that they also have the potential to enable people to shape a stronger, more self-determined existence as well. This negotiation is the process by which an individual's identity is re-defined (Mead, 1934), and helps to understand how venturers on Raleigh expeditions go through an introspective process of considering who they are and who they want to become, in the face of constant social influences.

Relationships with others

The second category of participant outcomes involves on relationships with others, with the theme of being more comfortable meeting and working

with strangers being by far the most dominant. The data demonstrated how Tracy felt she had become "a lot better at mixing with people." Similarly, Stuart found he was "a lot more relaxed around people I don't know." Roni told me how "I think this is helping my interaction with people as well and I hope it will encourage me when I get back home ... to give everything a go." For someone who I thought felt little anxiety when speaking to strangers, Gordo explained how being on the Raleigh expedition had made "speaking to people easier ... it just sort of blows a lot of barriers out of the way and you just speak to everyone." Cooley's (1964) concept of the looking glass self may provide further insight into how venturers may gain a certain "interpersonal confidence." If identities are modified and strengthened through the unfamiliar interactions found on expedition, it is arguable that venturers become more comfortable with their perceptions of how they are being perceived by others. This strengthened self, gazing into the looking glass, may lend individuals an added degree of confidence in the social situations they encounter.

Building on the theme of interpersonal gain is the outcome that venturers are less likely to prejudge people before getting to know them. Sylvio told me "One thing I can really take from Raleigh is that when I first came here I was quite closed and did not open up to people very quickly and was sort of seeing bad points in people." Simone's feelings were similar in her statement "that's one thing I know that I've learnt is not to judge people on the first impression, 'cause they're always so different when you get to know them." The improved ability to interact with people was not restricted to relationships with strangers, but extended to those people who were known superficially, but were not friends and who came from different backgrounds than themselves. An example of this is Tracy's comment:

All of my closest friends in all of my groups have been YDP, which is really strange because I remember talking to you at the Challenge Workshop thinking, 'how am I going to relate to these people, how am I going to get on with them - I've got nothing in common with them.' And it's been the absolute opposite. (Tracy)

Gaining interpersonal skills specifically related to being a working member of a team only emerged in two of 69 interviews. Sylvio felt that the expedition would help him "be a better leader, a better team player, by encouraging people and getting them involved." Although Nonnie wanted to gain teamwork experience, she felt that teamwork was essentially about "people skills - how to get along with people, how to work in a group."

Being more comfortable meeting new people and being better at working within a team refer to an increased facility with interpersonal relationships. This is consistent with findings in all three of the empirical inquiries into the outcomes of British overseas youth expeditions. Grey's (1984) study found that the young explorers "had learnt the necessity of working with others and realised the ability to do so" (p. 18). Kennedy's (1992) work found that the expedition had positively influenced their attitudes towards other people. And finally, Allison's (2002) findings showed how the young people felt they became more adept at deciding when to speak up or hold their tongue.

Society

The findings of this inquiry yielded no evidence of an altered appreciation or awareness of environmental issues. This is perhaps not surprising as Raleigh's objectives do not include helping young people form an environmental ethic, and environmental projects are used as a means to develop social skills. In its place is the third category of outcomes, which concentrate on individuals' relationships with society, or more specifically, social life beyond primary groups. The first of two themes in the society category focuses on how the expedition has increased venturers' appreciation of the modern conveniences in their home community.

As venturers witnessed the apparently constant and overt joy exuded by local villagers in rural West Africa, they appeared to realise that they did not need all the material possessions they thought would bring them lasting happiness. Indeed, several venturers found that their Raleigh experience showed them how they live in privileged conditions compared to many Ghanaians. Maria explained how expedition life made her "appreciate home much more. Just simple little things like running water and a couch to sit on - and not sleeping on the floor." Simone felt she was "going to appreciate things about home, like water... it's the little things that you don't really think about." Sylvio shared this opinion that one of the best things he would "take from Raleigh, is an appreciation of everything you have back home."

Other venturers appeared to learn a lesson from a familiar cliché becoming the truth: money does not buy happiness. An example of this theme is Gordo's observation that people in the host communities are "just so grateful for what little they have - it's just brilliant. Why do we need all the luxuries in life?". Natasha felt that living in a rural African village was "an eye opener" as it helped her realise that "you don't need everything you've got at home." Natasha's sentiments were supported by Lily who agreed that "you don't even need that much to be happy." Lily went on to say that this lesson was "one of the main things I learned out there ... they had so little and they were the happiest people I'd seen in my life." Once

back in the UK, Dale shook his head in disbelief as he remembered how the villagers “don’t have no electric and they’re happy. We’re lucky to have furniture and that and they’ve got nothing.” Finally, Rufus despaired about people in the UK who put such a high premium on financial success. During an interview on a community service project, he exclaimed how “these people are so nice. You don’t get people like this in the Western world. These people lack a lot of things financially, but the riches they’ve got inside themselves is priceless.”

This theme of being happier with less seemed to be a quite a direct challenge to the attitudes many venturers brought with them on expedition. Symbolic interactionism explains how interaction with local African people altered the meanings that young people had for material possessions. In Blumer’s (1969) terms, as individuals interact with the unfamiliar physical, social, and abstract objects encountered on their expedition to West Africa, they are constantly interpreting these interactions and shaping meanings that may not have been challenged before.

The second theme in the category of relationships with greater society is an increased awareness of the differences and imbalances between life in Ghana and life in the UK. Rufus claimed that this engagement provided him and his project group “insights into other people and makes us think twice about wasting things ... material stuff.” Living within a rural West African community was something that had a profound effect on Tracy, as she “did not expect Africa to be this bad or this poor.” Tracy went on to say “I knew it would be poor, but I hadn’t realised how different it would be from home and so the whole initial culture shock thing was quite major.” In her remark that this expedition had broadened her “outlook on the world,” Tracy used the same words as Grey (1984) when he outlined the main outcomes of his study, twenty years before.

Shortly before returning to the UK, Sylvio reflected on the hedonistic world that he had left behind for ten weeks and was now returning to. He wrestled with how his changed attitudes towards consumption would fit with his old peer group. Sylvio explained how he was worried about returning to a place where “most people’s satisfaction comes from indulgence. It’s like people tend to work hard but not enjoy their work. And then at the end of the day eat a lot, drink a lot, or buy a lot.” Although he did not articulate it as such, it appeared that Sylvio subscribed to the viewpoint that individuals are influenced by their surroundings. Just as he was proud that for the first time in his life he was finding satisfaction in self-reliance and daily hard work, so too was he fearful that these feelings and learnings would dissolve once he had returned to the influences of his UK his peer group, whose existence revolved around movies, music, and alcohol.

Work by Mead (1934), Stryker (2000), and Beal (2002) is helpful in understanding how individuals have the power to transform themselves, but do so in face of the conformist pressures of their social environment. Sylvio’s worries about going back home can be explained by his expedition identity, constructed through interaction with people on the expedition, integrating into a set of social circumstances that is incompatible with his newly constructed self. It seems evident that the generalised attitudes of the people surrounding Sylvio during the expedition were very different from those he was accustomed to in the UK.

Rufus pondered his own roots in a developing nation and gained a heightened awareness of the opportunities afforded him by his British passport:

I know I’m very fortunate to be in London and not in Bangladesh. ‘Cause I could be in the same circumstances as someone in Ghana, in Bangladesh, if things did not work out for my family, my father – early on in his life. I have so many more opportunities than the people over there [in Ghana]. (Rufus)

Rufus realised he had privileged educational, travel, and career opportunities because his father emigrated to England from Bangladesh. Had his father not come over to England as a young man he would have had the same restrictions and lack of opportunities that he saw with Ghanaians his own age. The discussion of Rufus realising the opportunities he has as a British citizen, and Sylvio being concerned with re-integrating into the consumer-driven social pattern he has come to question, illustrate how subjective and personally relevant expeditionary learning can be.

Conclusions and implications

The participant outcomes of the 10-week Raleigh International expedition to Ghana in the autumn of 2002 can be classified into three categories. The first category of relationships with one’s self yielded three themes. First, venturers gained a certain mental resilience in the face of demanding conditions. Second, venturers explained how they had become more willing to seek out new challenges. Symbolic interactionism theory offers an explanation of how individuals’ interpretations of their interactions with the social, physical, and abstract objects found on expedition led to modified meanings of their self (Blumer, 1969). The third theme highlighted how participants gained a greater understanding of their self and how it responded to the challenges of living in an unfamiliar environment. Mead (1934) helps us to understand how, once individuals are free from the generalised attitudes of their UK social patterns, they may come to know their core selves at a deeper level. Furthermore,

an individual's self then becomes a product of her/his core self together with the generalised attitudes of the expedition community.

The second category of relationships with other people had one dominant theme of participants becoming more at ease with interacting with strangers. One explanation may be participants' increased sense of self (mentioned in the previous paragraph), offering a stronger reflection in Cooley's (1964) looking glass. It follows that this strengthening of how individuals perceive others perceiving them increases people's ease and "interpersonal confidence" in social interactions.

The third category of outcomes refers to individuals' attitudes towards greater society. First, participants developed a greater appreciation of the taken-for-granted privileges of Western society, such as running water, flush toilets, and supermarkets. Second, venturers learned of the economic and democratic differences between the UK and a developing nation, like Ghana. Blumer's (1969) theory explains how these modified attitudes are the result of venturers' interactions with the unfamiliar physical and social environments found in rural West Africa, along with venturers' subsequent interpretations of these interactions.

Reflection upon experience resulting in modifying behaviour is a familiar cliché for experiential educators. Symbolic interactionism offers an alternative lens through which to consider this maxim, while affording a deeper examination of naturalistic research data. For the purposes of this case study, symbolic interactionism provides a viable and useful theoretical framework for considering the influences of an overseas expedition on its participants. I encourage practitioners and researchers to consider how this perspective of social theory serves to strengthen our understanding of the ways in which participants in all kinds of outdoor education programmes construct meaning and identity through a process of interaction and interpretation.

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About the author

Simon Beames, PhD, lectures in the outdoor education section of the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. Email: sbeames@education.ed.ac.uk